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Guest columnist

Our delicate history of spying

BETHESDA, Md. — The USA's resolve to be an example to the world has made intelligence work an agonizing task.

Gen. George Washington employed many spies but was reluctant to provide posterity with meaningful details, even after the Revolution.

The result was a lot of fiction in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* (1821). Another result was the raising of executed spies like Nathan Hale and John Andre to the level of martyrdom, thus minimizing fine points of right and wrong.

In 1793, Congress provided funds for intelligence activities directed by the president. Criticism emerged, however, as agents sometimes combined espionage and diplomatic activities without the advice and consent of the Senate.

Little wonder that presidents in the early 19th century were eager to wash their hands of spy matters, especially after Andrew Jackson drew congressional censure in 1831.

During the Civil War, the U.S. Secret Service was organized by a private citizen, Allan Pinkerton, best known for his detective agency. Had Pinkerton's name and firm not been discredited later, the nation may well have employed a privately managed spy system.

When the Office of Naval Intelligence was organized in 1882, this bold measure was softened with a proposal for a war college. And the Army's Military Information Division, founded in 1885, was assured a non-controversial obscurity through only token funding.

By World War I, the Department of State exerted authority over espionage work, primarily as a coordinator, leaving the task of initiation up in the air.

To be sure, World War II saw effective espionage activities employed through the Office of Strategic Services.

However, our distrust of clandestine activity returned after 1945 in the debate over creation of the Central Intelligence Agency and the notoriety that the agency received in its early years.

Failures gave spying an even worse problem, as illustrated when a U.S. reconnaissance plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. The incident torpedoed a summit meeting scheduled two weeks later.

President John F. Kennedy summed up the agony of an open society's delicate history with spying in 1961, when he dedicated the CIA headquarters building: "Your successes are unheralded," he said. "Your failures are trumpeted."

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